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ABSTRACT

Writing autobiographies, in which students describe their experiences as writers, show that students already know a great deal about their strengths and weaknesses as writers and about the conditions they need to write successfully. Typical first assignments given to entering college students are often used to diagnose the ability level and potential problem areas of a student. These essays, however, are very unreliable indicators of student abilities. Instructors may learn a great deal more by asking students directly to assess their own abilities as writers, as students' responses show. These responses disclose a wide variety of writing experiences among students, and they enable the teacher to assess where a student is starting from better than any other type of assignment. Students, for instance, are often keenly aware of writing as a process. Many two-year college students have a negative view of their previous writing instruction, complaining that "regular" high school English classes offer little help to average writers. Interestingly, students often complain that they were not asked to write much in high school English courses. With proper follow-through, the writing autobiography provides the teacher with useful information about the students' skills and needs, and it also invites students to monitor their own development as writers. Finally, it helps set the tone for the course by respecting students as thinkers and inviting them to picture themselves as writers. (HB)

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John Sandman and Michael Weiser

THE WRITING AUTOBIOGRAPHY:

WHERE TO BEGIN IN A TWO-YEAR COLLEGE WRITING COURSE

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Writing autobiographies, in which students describe their experiences as writers, show that students already know a great deal about their strengths and weaknesses as writers and about the conditions they need to write successfully.

"Begin with where they are," is the first of Ann Berthoff's maxims for writing teachers. By this, she means that we should not think of our students as "dummies" but "as language animals, endowed with the form-finding and form-creating powers of mind and language"(9). " Most teachers," observed Mina Shaugnessy, "assume that they are starting from scratch," without considering the various writing experiences that students bring to any course (154). Determining "where they are," or where scratch is for each student is particularly difficult for two-year college teachers, given the broad range of students in our classrooms.

Traditional Diagnostic Essays

Consider the kinds of assignments typically given on the first day of a writing course:

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Write an essay about a significant person in your life.

Describe a place that is particularly special to you.

Read the following passage from George Orwell's "A Hanging." What do you think Orwell is saying about capital punishment? Do you agree or disagree

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with his views?

Teachers often start with an essay on a topic like one of these in order to diagnose whether the student belongs at the particular level, or what kinds of extra help -- grammatical, stylistic, rhetorical -- the student will need. Students are often required to complete this essay within one class period.

The essays teachers receive in response to this kind of assignment often cause them to underestimate students' abilities, or to become overly concerned about students who, given a longer time and more practice at composing, turn out to be very able writers. Therefore, these essays are, at best, unreliable indicators of students' writing abilities. Most importantly, these essays are a very indirect way to assess students' strengths and weaknesses.

The Writing Autobiograhy

Instead of asking students to write about significant people or special places or capital punishment, why not respect them enough to directly ask them to assess their own competencies as writers? For their first assignment, our students compose a writing autobiography, in response to the following questions:

1. Think of some particular times in your life when writing was a positive experience. Describe a couple of those times in as much detail as you can.

What were the tasks, the assignments, the circumstances? What do some of your positive writing experiences have in common? What are some of the factors that make writing a positive experience for you?

2. Describe some negative writing experiences you have had. Think of some times when writing was difficult, frustrating, unsatisfying. Again, please be as specific as you can. Try to describe particular occasions. What are some of the conditions that make writing difficult for you?

3. What are your strengths and weaknesses as a writer? What experiences have led you to believe that you have these strengths and weaknesses?

We talk about the questions in class, drawing out specific examples. Then we give our students until the next class to answer the questions in writing. We stress that this writing will not be graded, and that we will not use it to weed them out, thus encouraging them to write more freely and candidly.

Student Responses

The responses we receive to this assignment more than bear out Shaughnessy's and Berthoff's assumptions about the variety of writing experience students bring into our classes, and they enable us to determine, better than any form of intital assessment we've encountered, where each student is starting from.

Awareness of Writing as A Process

One of the most pleasant surprises offered by these autobiographies is the large number of students who already have a sense of writing as a process. Many describe

negative experiences resulting from trying to write a paper in one sitting:

> I had saved the project untill the night before it was due and I literally strained myself sorting out ideas and thoughts. Trying to write a term project in six hours wasn't the smartest thing I could have done.

What strikes a teacher/reader about this is not so much the experience, common as it is, but the student's awareness of the behavior which caused it: the attempt to shape at the point of utterance (Britton 110).

Other students express gratitude toward teachers who have instructed them to compose in stages:

> On the first day of this writing course, I had to write an essay on the spring season. Since I wasn't ever a good writer, this essay was a disaster. Then I spoke with my teacher, and she gave me a few ideas. She started off by telling me to work on the organization of my thoughts. She gave me a few ideas, such as using index cards to write my thoughts on, which greatly helped me on the next essay.

Stories like this differ only in the particulars of the process: in all of them, the students write of this lesson as the most important they've learned.

Occasionally, bearing out Berthoff's characterization of humans as "language

animals," students describe having developed their own processes:

> A positive writing experience that I have experienced was a theme about Christmas celebrations. This teacher gave us a week to write the theme. I thought this was going to be a cinch but I was wrong. The theme was two pages. It was extremely difficult to cram years of childhood Christmas memories onto two sheets of theme paper. So I began writing my theme by making a list of my most cherished Christmas memories. Eventually I narrowed them down to six especially momentous occasions. I listed the events in chronological order and had some of the events take on different dimensions at different ages.

This student clearly did not need to be taught the value of brainstorming; she discovered it on her own.

These responses have made us realize that when we talk about writing processes in our courses, we are not necessarily starting from scratch. Most students already have some awareness of writing as a process. Now, when we introduce the concept of writing processes in our courses, we present selections from students' writing autobiographies which show that they already know, to some extent, what we are trying to teach them.

Non-Honors English

Because we teach at a two-year college, most of what our students have to tell us

about their previous writing experiences is negative. A common complaint has to do with the seemingly galactic distance between "regular" high school English classes and those in which one writes:

> In my school teachers didn't help kids much with writing. You had to be in honors classes. When it came to writing there wasn't much. English classes were just a teacher giving you a book and telling you to read it. And then there was the True or False Test.

> My 10th and 11th grade English teacher was terrible, all he made us do was vocabulary and reading. My 12th grade English class was a joke, all the teacher gave us was vocabulary , and there was no homework. I never had an English teacher who made us do essays or reports.

These students express bitterness at not having been given a chance to do more writing: the class that didn't include writing was a joke. While this lack of previous writing experience is unfortunate, these students seem eager to make up for lost time.

Suffering from a similar deprivation, but with an additional stigma, a large number of two-year college students have been subjected to what Mike Rose calls the "medical model" of teaching. That is, students who lack basic skills "sit in scholastic quarantine until their diseases can be diagnosed and remedied" (210). Many of our students describe being placed in remedial programs where heavy doses of drills and

workbook exercises took the place of writing. The following experience is, unfortunately, still representative:

> In elementary school I was always put into the lowest language or English groups. They were fine but we never really did any writing, they always stressed the workbooks.

Even more damaging than the lack of writing experience, once students are labeled "remedial," they find it hard to stop thinking of themselves as in some way deficient, even when they demonstrate highly-developed rhetorical and stylistic skills:

> In the beginning, I was always busted on my reading ability. You see, I have two older brothers who are very smart. I am not saying that I am not as smart as they are but when it comes to writing I am hopeless. I pointed out reading because that's where it began. My lack of reading caused my spelling ability to be very low. If you can't spell, you can't write. I still can't spell, as I will deminstrate in this essay. I will say, though, that I have conquered my reading problem.
>
> I remember that every summer, I had to attend reading and writing classes to help me improve in these subjects. I hated that more than anything. I think that this made me more turned off to writing than it helped me. You see, these weren't required summer classes. These were very special classes for kids with

low reading scores. So picture this: your with your friends and your mother calls you, Billy, its time to go to school. My friends of course would say what the hell is she talking about its summer. Any excuse I gave them would never work. So it would be totally embarrassing. From those days on, I always hated reading and writing. So if you think you can change my outlook and ability, please do so.

This is, admittedly, an exceptionally eloquent response. What this student tells us is belied by the skill with which he tells it, revealing far more abilities than disabilities. He presents us with a moving account of sibling rivalry and social ostracism. He can't spell--"as I will deminstrate" (his first mispelling)--but he can spell "conquered." He's audience-aware enough to say, "Picture this." and to go on to give the reader a picture. And he closes with a plea--one to which any student-centered teacher of writing would reply--"Change your oultlook definitely, if I can; the ability is already there." What these accounts often tell us, more clearly than any standardized test or traditinal diagnostic essay, is how not to teach our students.

I Don't Have Any Strengths

Again, because we teach at a two-year college, we almost never receive writing autobiographies in which students claim to have no problems with writing. Asked to discuss their strengths and weaknesses as writers, students tend to name twice as many weaknesses as strengths. The following is representative in content, if not in form:

Weaknesses: 1. I have a lot of trouble taking criticism. 2. I write a lot of run-on sentences, and I miss spell a few too many things. 3. Sometimes I don't even understand the assignment, so I screw up on the writing part. 4. I'm not good in vocabulary. 5. Lots of times I go on and on about a bunch of nothing, but I'm learning to control that. 6. Sometimes I don't tie things together when they should be.

Strengths: 1. I'm persistent. 2. I never care how long it takes me, just as long as I get the job done. 3. I never have to worry about not having written enough.

Although this student stresses her weaknesses, her specificity is enabling for herself and her teacher: it makes her weaknesses into problems that she and her teacher can work to solve. Many students come into our courses with similarly strong understandings of their abilities. The writing autobiography allows us to see how they perceive themselves as writers and to begin helping them to build upon their strengths and minimize their weaknesses.

The Writing Autobiography as Assessment Instrument

In Designing Writing Tasks for the Assessment of Writing, Leo Ruth and Sandra Murphy make a number of recommendations for effective diagnostic essay topics, including the following:

An examination system has value to the extent that it contributes sound

information to improve classroom teaching and educational guidance for students (43).

We need to involve students in monitoring their own development as writers (24

With proper follow-through, the writing autobiography fits both these desiderata: it provides the writing teacher with sound and useful information about individual students' writing skills and instructional needs; and it invites students to monitor, from the outset of the course, their own development as writers.

Ruth and Murphy also describe a growing preference for portfolio-based writing assessment (241-2, 246-7). Given the difficulty, if not impossibility, of procuring writing portfolios from all incoming students, the writing autobiography provides the next best thing: the student's own account of her prior writing experiences. We do not pretend that our version of the assignment is the only, or even the best, possible: the more detailed the responses solicited by the assignment, the better.

Finally, Ruth and Murphy stress throughout their book the importance of taking into account socioeconomic and cultural differences among students. The writing autobiography is socioeconomically and culturally inclusive; because students need not write of their experiences as writers of English, it's even linguistically inclusive.

Perhaps the ultimate recommendation for the writing autobiography, however is that it sets the tone for our courses. It invites students, from the beginning, to think of themselves as writers. It helps them to realize, and us to remember, that they have experience and knowledge as writers on which to build.

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